

Actes numériques du colloque

« Où sont les bibliothèques spoliées par les nazis ?

Tentatives d'identification et de restitution, un chantier en cours »

23 et 24 mars 2017, Paris

Postwar Bargains? German Librarians and the Abandoned Collections of Nazi Loot

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Farack Bettina, Neumann Hannah. *Postwar Bargains? German Librarians and the Abandoned Collections of Nazi Loot* [en ligne]. In : Où sont les bibliothèques spoliées par les nazis ?, Paris, 23-24 mars 2017. Villeurbanne : École nationale supérieure des sciences de l'information et des bibliothèques, 2019. Format PDF.

Disponible sur : <https://www.enssib.fr/bibliotheque-numerique/notices/68749-postwar-bargains-german-librarians-and-the-abandoned-collections-of-nazi-loot>

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Où sont les bibliothèques françaises spoliées par les nazis ? Presses de l'Enssib, avril 2019.
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Postwar Bargains? German Librarians and the Abandoned Collections of Nazi Loot

Introduction

In 1951 a British committee checked the efforts made by the Germans to return looted property to their owners. The results were devastating.¹ The committee reported that German administrations were not only delaying the implementation of the occupation laws. They also openly favored the profiteers of the looting.² Not surprisingly, for looting and profiting by it had been both beneficial and common to the *Volksgemeinschaft*.

Although, the looting in the *Third Reich* was not committed for the benefit, but only accompanied the elimination of humans, a wide spread gold rush sentiment can be observed concerning German individuals and institutions.³ The promise to prosper was also caught up by German librarians. By a complex distribution system, they gained advantage of the plunder; indeed, they engaged willingly in the acquisition of looted books.⁴

Besides being beneficial, looting also was a common preoccupation, committed in the light of day. Looting did not violate the law, it complied with it. In National Socialism, law was terror, and the police was the crime. Does such a system deserve to be called law? Yes, Franz Neumann said, if law is nothing more than the will of the sovereign.⁵ Thus, theft becomes *Aryanization*.

The end of the war ended the looting. German librarians were ordered to report looted collections and mostly didn't. Their reluctance was witnessed by Gershom Scholem, who traveled Germany commissioned by the Hebrew University to search for the scattered remainders of Jewish collections. He reported: „There can be no doubt as to the unwillingness of German libraries to report anything. They all keep to the good old rule ‚Mein Name ist Hase, ich weiss [sic] von nichts.‘“⁶ Meaning I don't know anything about anything. – The unwillingness was practiced for instance by the city library of Berlin: The end of the war interrupted the processing of thousands of books acquired after the deportation of their owners, it didn't stop it. Only now, the accessioning number of single volumes was no longer preceded by a capital “J” referring to books that were stolen from Jewish owners, but by a capital “G” as in “Gifts”.⁷

¹ Cf. Jürgen Lillteicher, *Raub, Recht und Restitution: Die Rückerstattung jüdischen Eigentums in der frühen Bundesrepublik*, *Moderne Zeit* 15 (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2007), 319.

² Cf. Report of the O'Sullivan Committee on the progress made in the disposal of internal restitution claims in the British Zone of Germany, June 30, 1951, FO 371/100001, Public Record Office, Kew/London

³ Cf. Götz Aly, *Hitlers Volksstaat: Raub, Rassenkrieg und nationaler Sozialismus* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 2005), 361.

⁴ Cf. Peter Pröhl, “Buchwege: Projektergebnisse der Zentral- und Landesbibliothek Berlin,” in Dehnel, *NS-Raubgut in Museen, Bibliotheken und Archiven*, 460–61.

⁵ Cf. Franz Neumann, *Behemoth: Struktur und Praxis des Nationalsozialismus 1933-1944*, (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1984), 530.

⁶ Hannah Arendt and Gershom Scholem, *Der Briefwechsel* (Berlin: Jüdischer Verlag, 2010), 204.

⁷ Cf. Sebastian Finsterwalder and Peter Pröhl, “Tracing the rightful owners: Nazi-looted books in the Central and Regional Library of Berlin,” in *“The West” versus “the East” or the United Europe? The different conceptions of provenance research, documentation and identification of looted cultural as-*

However, not enough, that German librarians were reluctant to part from loot already held, they also were eager to obtain even more looted books after the war ended. It is to be shown that nearly everywhere the Germans were not restrained by the Military Administrations of the Allied Forces, they tried to secure a share of the so-called abandoned collections. Referring to the necessity of re-building German libraries after the “incomparable losses” caused by the war,⁸ every retrieved collection was considered a legitimate compensation, whether it might contain loot or not.

In the following, we will describe the diverging approaches of the Allied Forces towards the abandoned collections in Germany. They set the frame within which German libraries and administrations operated. Afterwards, the participation of German institutions in the recovery of the abandoned collections will be described.

The Abandoned Collections

To explain the concept of the so-called abandoned collections, the distribution of the looted books must be recalled in short. Following their expropriation, the books were transferred to either NS-, federal, or provincial institutions, libraries or private buyers. Public and university libraries were glad to re-fill their stocks, since, the market for books was heavily limited by the war. NS-institutions, on the other hand, eagerly pocketed vast amounts of looted books of their own. They were obsessed by the idea, to build up libraries of the loot to study those groups that they persecuted.

Due to the course of war many institutions evacuated their collections to repositories scattered all over the Reich. In these cases, the end of the war stripped the institutions from control over the wide spread repositories. By this rather practical way one part of the collections became abandoned. Other collections had been legally expropriated by the Allied Forces, following the liquidation of the holding NS- and public institutions. Furthermore, a third part of collections of unknown origin must be kept in mind, since the big-scale relocation of holdings to allegedly secure repositories during the war had led to some confusion. Therefore, at the end of the war collections were discovered “of which no one quite knew where they came from and to whom they ever had belonged.”⁹

Thus, the so-called abandoned collections were made of a variety of assets being partly legally and partly practically abandoned. Nonetheless, they set the same challenge. They needed to be recovered, to avoid plundering and damage. The recovery of the abandoned collections was performed diversely. Consequently, their fate and that of the loot among them was determined by where they ended the war as much as by whom they were found.

Handling the Abandoned Collections

Due to the different approaches of the Allies regarding the abandoned collections, this lecture is structured geographically. Firstly, the Western Occupation Zones, secondly, the Soviet Occupation Zone, and last but not least, the city of Berlin will be covered in short.

sets and the possibilities of international cooperation in Europe and worldwide. Proceedings of an international academic conference held in Poděbrady on 8 - 9 october, 2013, ed. Mečislav Borák (Prague: Documentation Centre for Property Transfers of Cultural Assets of WWII Victims, 2014), 94–95.

⁸ Cf. Georg Leyh, *Die deutschen wissenschaftlichen Bibliotheken nach dem Krieg* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1947), 5.

⁹ Sigrid Tröger, “Die Geschichte der Zentralstelle für wissenschaftliche Altbestände,” *Zentralblatt für Bibliothekswesen* 80, no. 7 (1966): 416.

Western Occupation Zones

Already during the war Allied forces set up an extensive art protection program leaving few things to the Germans in the beginning. We all know the famous “monuments men” for example. Their task was to protect the cultural heritage¹⁰ and to search and recover confiscated and relocated cultural assets.¹¹ The retrieved assets were gathered up in Collecting Points especially established for this purpose. Here they were identified, sorted, and prepared for restitution. The most important Collecting Point was the Offenbach Archival Depot. For further information on the OAD, see the instructive study of Elizabeth Gallas.

“By the time the Depot closed in 1949, it had handled more than 3.2 million items in over thirty-five languages and more than 2.8 million were returned to over fourteen nations.”¹² But not every item’s provenance could be identified. The remaining books were placed into the trusteeship of the governor of Hesse¹³, the state in which the OAD was located. Although, the trusteeship included the instruction to continue the efforts leading to further restitutions, the books were forwarded to the university library of Frankfurt on the Main,¹⁴ which started to distribute the Offenbach-collection to other libraries in December 1948.¹⁵ One was the university library of Gießen. This library received about 5.000 volumes from the asset of the OAD, parts of it evidently being loot.¹⁶ Another one was the University and State Library in Darmstadt. Lately, a research project on Nazi-loot exposed that these transmissions possibly even outdo the acquisitions of looted books during the *Third Reich*.

Here you see a picture of the sorting areas in the OAD and a stamp from a book today in the stock of the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin.

Another operation in the US-Zone was the Library of Congress Mission. Its task was to secure books that belonged to NS-institutions and to distribute them among American libraries. The fact that these books had been looted before became obvious, when their accessioning started. Consequently, vast amounts of them were sent back to Germany in the 50s and 60s.¹⁷

Additionally, not every abandoned collection recovered by the western Allies was shipped to the OAD. The desolate condition of German libraries caused the Allied Forces to leave some of the collections to them. Two examples, which are already being researched: The State and University library of Hamburg received the library of the *Wehrkreisbücherei X* at the re-

¹⁰ Elisabeth Gallas, *“Das Leichenhaus der Bücher“: Kulturrestitution und jüdisches Geschichtsdenken nach 1945*, Schriften des Simon-Dubnow-Instituts 19 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 28.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹² Anne Rothfeld, “Returning Looted European Library Collections: An Historical Analysis of the Offenbach Archival Depot, 1945-1948,” *RBM: a journal of rare books, manuscripts, and cultural heritage* 6, no. 1 (2005): 15, accessed September 27, 2015, <http://rbm.acrl.org/content/6/1/14.full.pdf#page=1&view=FitH>.

¹³ Cf. Gabriele Hauschke-Wicklaus, Angelika Amborn-Morgenstern and Erika Jacobs, *Fast vergessen: Das amerikanische Bücherdepot in Offenbach am Main von 1945 bis 1949* (Offenbach am Main: OE, Offenbacher Ed, 2011), 108.

¹⁴ Cf. Olaf Schneider, “Geschenkt? Getauscht? Geraubte Bücher aus der NS-Zeit in der Universitätsbibliothek Gießen,” in *NS-Raubgut in hessischen Bibliotheken*, ed. Ira Kasperowski and Claudia Martin-Konle, Berichte und Arbeiten aus der Universitätsbibliothek und dem Universitätsarchiv Giessen 62 (Gießen: Univ.-Bibl, 2014), 100.

¹⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 101.

¹⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, 105.

¹⁷ Cf. Rüdiger Zimmermann, “Berlin - Offenbach - Washington - Bonn: Das Offenbach Archival Depot und die Gewerkschaftsbestände der Bibliothek der Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung,” *AKMB-news* 8, no. 2 (2002): 13, accessed March 8, 2017, <http://journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/akmb-news/article/view/248/233>.

quest of its director, Hermann Tiemann.¹⁸ And the Bavarian State Library acquired the comprehensive collection of the *Ordensburg Sonthofen*, besides other “NS-collections”.¹⁹

I quote the famous phrase by Seymour Pomrenze, the first head of the OAD, that the art protection measures of the western Allied Forces represented the “antithesis to the Nazi loot-ing”. To achieve restitution, the Allied forces took matters in their own hands, limiting the scope of action of German administrations and libraries. The direct acquisitions of recovered collections would not have been possible without the permission of the Military Government. But the handling of the remaining OAD-collection shows that German librarians understood to make use of even a limited scope of action.

Soviet Occupation Zone and GDR

On the territory of the Soviet Occupation Zone compensation for the committed crimes was understood fundamentally different. The wrong to amend was first of all the wrong committed against the Soviet Union and Poland. Individuals who had suffered repression and persecution, were granted social welfare.²⁰ At least in theory and depending on whether they were loyal to the party line. A restitution of their holdings was almost without exception out of question, since assets that had been held by the liquidated NS- or public institutions were expropriated. They were declared public property by the orders no. 124/126 and 64.²¹ Restitution would have meant re-privatizing the assets, what seemed absurd „in a phase that was dedicated to the development of socialism in a new state.”²²

Since the German looting in eastern Europe meant rather destroying the loot than utilizing it, there was not too much left to retribute. So, the Soviet Union established a so-called “compensation in kind” for the losses its institutions had suffered.²³ For this purpose, the Trophy Brigades were deployed. The Trophy Brigades seized and relocated to the Soviet Union a still not exactly known number of books from libraries all over the Soviet Zone of Germany.²⁴ Subject to seizure were the evacuated assets of public libraries and those of NS-institutions, such as the Reich Security Main Offices’.²⁵ Among some of these holdings were looted books. Shipped to the Soviet Union, they were out of reach for restitution and as Patricia Kennedy Grimsted has phrased it: plundered twice.²⁶

¹⁸ Cf. Ulrike Preuß, ““Erwerbung im Ganzen! sehr erwünscht...”: Der lange Weg der 1938 beschlagnahmten Bibliothek Petschek und ihre Identifizierung im Bestand der SUB Hamburg,” in Dehnel, *NS-Raubgut in Museen, Bibliotheken und Archiven*, 369.

¹⁹ Cf. Stephan Kellner and Susanne Wanninger, “Forschung nach NS-Raubgut in der Bayerischen Staatsbibliothek: Einem „schlechten Geschäft“ auf der Spur,” in Dehnel, *NS-Raubgut in Museen, Bibliotheken und Archiven*, 63–64.

²⁰ Cf. Jan Philipp Spannuth, *Rückerstattung Ost: Der Umgang der DDR mit dem "arisierten" Eigentum der Juden und die Rückerstattung im wiedervereinigten Deutschland* (Essen: Klartext, 2007), 64.

²¹ Cf. *ibid.*, 89.

²² *Ibid.*, 66.

²³ Cf. Grigorij Kozlov, “Die sowjetischen “Trophäenbrigaden”: Systematik und Anarchie des Kunstraubes einer Siegermacht,” in *Kulturgüter im Zweiten Weltkrieg: Verlagerung - Auffindung - Rückführung*, ed. Koordinierungsstelle für Kulturgutverluste Magdeburg, Veröffentlichungen der Koordinierungsstelle für Kulturgutverluste 4 (Magdeburg 2007), 99.

²⁴ Cf. Klaus-Dieter Lehmann and Ingo Kolasa, eds., *Die Trophäenkommissionen der Roten Armee: Eine Dokumentensammlung zur Verschleppung von Büchern aus deutschen Bibliotheken*, Zeitschrift für Bibliothekswesen und Bibliographie Sonderbände 64 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1996).

²⁵ Patricia Grimsted, “Tracing Patterns of European Library Plunder: Books Still Not Home from the War,” in *Jüdischer Buchbesitz als Raubgut: Zweites Hannoversches Symposium*, ed. Regine Dehnel, Zeitschrift für Bibliothekswesen und Bibliographie Sonderbände 88 (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 2006), 147.

²⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, 142.

Although the number of collections relocated by the Trophy Brigades is unknown, it is certain that they seized not every abandoned collection found on the territory of the Soviet Zone. Plus: Parts of collections seized by the Trophy Brigades were restituted in the 50's and 60's. Furthermore, it must be considered, that the work of the Trophy Brigades is marked by a conflict of interests with the Soviet Military Administration.²⁷ While the Trophy Brigades aimed at seizing collections regardless of the impact on German institutions, the SMAD was interested in setting-up a self-sufficient state. So, besides putting a stop to the dismantling and relocation of industry, the SMAD ordered the re-opening of the museums and other "public education institutions". To follow the order, authority over evacuated assets had to be transferred to German institutions. This was done by the order no. 177 in June 1946.²⁸ Shortly after, the SMAD-order no. 0249 was issued addressing the recovery of book collections. Its title in translation: "On the return of evacuated book stocks and the usage of abandoned libraries and books."²⁹ Evacuated assets were to be returned to the owning "German public education institutions" and abandoned collections were to be delivered to the governors of the German states.

You see the SMAD-order at the picture.

By this order authority over the abandoned collections was turned over to the German provincial governments of the Soviet Zone. Their recovery and distribution were put into the hands of the German Central Administration of Public Education. How the order was carried into effect and how the recovery was organized have not been researched yet. Documents of the German Central Administration of Public Education can be found at the Federal Archives. To conduct research on these questions, documents of the departments of education of practically every provincial government of the Soviet Zone need to be consulted and analyzed. By this it might be possible to reconstruct the recovery of abandoned collections found on this territory.

The abandoned collections recovered after the war's end made up only a portion of books in the Soviet Zone, which were going to change their placement and owners during the following years. Caused by the land reform and some following administrative reforms a high number of libraries and collections were confiscated by the state to be distributed to other, mainly scientific libraries within the GDR. Although, the operations in the Soviet Occupation Zone and the GDR still need to be reconstructed in detail, a result is already known: „The abandoned book stocks filled the storage rooms of the administrations and the shelves of the city and the county libraries. [...] The processing of the book stocks became a matter of severe concern and could only be solved centrally.”³⁰

To meet this challenge, the Central Office for the Scientific Old Stock was founded in 1953. It was located at first in Gotha, since 1959 at the State library in Berlin. The libraries in the GDR were obliged to transfer to the ZWA all books in their possession which were not inventoried and all of their duplicates. The number of participating libraries varied between 300 and later on 30. Within a period of about 30 years the Central Office handled about 6.3 Mio

²⁷ Cf. Kozlov, "Die sowjetischen "Trophäenbrigaden", 99.

²⁸ Cf. Sowjetische Militäradministration in Deutschland, Befehl des Obersten Chefs der SMAD Nr. 177 vom 18. Juni 1946. "Zurückführung von Museumswerken", June 18, 1946, BArch DR 2/6288, Bundesarchiv.

²⁹ Sowjetische Militäradministration in Deutschland, SMAD-Befehl Nr. 0249/46 vom 23. Aug. 1946: Über die Rückführung evakuierter Bücherbestände und die Benutzung herrenloser Bibliotheken und Bücher, August 23, 1946, BArch DX 1/165, Bundesarchiv.

³⁰ Träger, "Die Geschichte der Zentralstelle für wissenschaftliche Altbestände," 417.

volumes. Of these about 600.000 volumes were delivered to libraries. About 2.9 Mio volumes were given to the Central Antiquarian Department to be sold mainly to the FRG. 2.8 Mio volumes were discarded.³¹ The ZwA existed until 1995. Its role in the distribution of Nazi-loot, which was among the distributed books, is currently subject of research in a project at the State library in Berlin.

This is a screenshot of the site of the research project.

In brief, after the abandoned collections found in the Soviet Zone had been subject to seizure by the Trophy Brigades, the responsibility of recovering them was transferred to German administrations. The recovery being accomplished, a remarkable attempt to rationalize the further distribution can be observed. Unlike to the local administrations in the western Zones, those in the Soviet Zone were permitted nearly free access to the abandoned collections. They were less restrained by the Soviet Military Administration; consequently, they developed official channels to handle the abandoned collections.

Berlin

The city of Berlin must be covered separately to match the special role Berlin played. All the four Allies administered the city together. Accordingly, their diverging policies towards handling the abandoned collections were carried into effect, only now crammed together within the city's limits.

The resulting competition for the abandoned collections can be exemplified by the fate of the book stocks of the Reich Security Main Office which were mainly built of Nazi-loot. Although, parts of the library had been evacuated, considerable collections remained in two RSHA's repositories situated in Berlin.³² The Trophy Brigades cleared one depot and relocated it to the Soviet Union.³³ The other one eventually fell into the hands of the American forces; the recovered books were sent to the Offenbach Archival Depot to prepare for restitution.³⁴ However, before access was restricted to the Allied forces, German administrations managed to secure a share of the RSHA's holdings: "an unknown amount of stocks were collected and divided between Berlin's libraries."³⁵

This recovery was performed by the so-called Salvaging Organization for Scientific Libraries which was subordinated to the Department of Public Education of the Municipal administration. It was founded already in the summer of 1945.³⁶ The remarkably early foundation of the Salvaging Organization can be explained, on the one hand, by the vast amount of collections to be recovered in Berlin, the capital of the Reich, and its many institutions. On the other hand, one can notice that the attempt of German administrations to get access to the abandoned collections profited by the competition in which the opposing Allied forces were engaged in.

³¹ Cf. Andreas Mälck, "Zum Wirken der Zentralstelle für wissenschaftliche Altbestände in Vergangenheit und Gegenwart" (Diplomarbeit, Institut für Bibliothekswissenschaft, Humboldt-Universität, 1989), Supplement 4.

³² Cf. Werner Schroeder, "Strukturen des Bücherraubs: Die Bibliotheken des Reichssicherheitshauptamtes, ihr Aufbau und ihr Verbleib," *Zeitschrift für Bibliothekswesen und Bibliographie*, 5-6 (2004): 321.

³³ Cf. Grimsted, "Tracing Patterns of European Library Plunder," 147.

³⁴ Cf. Schroeder, "Strukturen des Bücherraubs," 322.

³⁵ Finsterwalder and Prölß, "Tracing the rightful owners," 96.

³⁶ Cf. Heike Schroll, "Die Bergungsstelle für wissenschaftliche Bibliotheken und Archive des Magistrats von Berlin," *Berlin in Geschichte und Gegenwart Jahrbuch des Landesarchivs Berlin*, 2000, 137.

The documents of the Salvaging Organization can be found online. The state archive and the ZLB put it together some years ago. If you have questions about this operation you can ask Sebastian Finsterwalder who will speak to us this afternoon and who published several articles about this topic. This is another screenshot.

Until the organization was closed in 1946, it had managed to recover about 1.7 Mio volumes. The salvaged books were distributed to various libraries situated in Berlin. "Quite naturally the items were integrated into the own holdings, no notice was taken of their origin and therefore of their initial owners."³⁷

Conclusion

In conclusion, at first the Allied Forces were responsible for the recovery of abandoned collections in Germany. At different points of time authority over the remaining collections was transferred to German institutions. In the summer of 1945 the Berlin Salvaging Organization was founded. 1 year later authority over collections recovered in the Soviet Zone was officially turned over to German administrations. And finally, in 1948 the remainder of the Offenbach Archival Depot were placed into the trusteeship of the governor of the state of Hesse. Whether in Berlin, the Soviet Zone or the western Zones, as soon as the power of disposition was entitled to German institutions, the abandoned collections were subjected to the task of rebuilding local library stocks. Contemporaries knew what they were handling, and welcomed the shipments of books nevertheless. The librarians were faced with the same marks of provenance that are subject of research today; and not to be forgotten, they were acquainted with the common preoccupation of looting that had only recently been put to an end. The end of the war meant to librarians in Germany to no longer accession books that were stolen from Jewish owners under a capital "J", but rather under a "G" as in gifts. Driven by the pragmatic sense for the own war-caused losses, the possibility to re-fill the stocks by abandoned collections was considered a bargain coming in handy.

We close our lecture with 3 recommendations: Firstly, more basic research on the distribution of looted books following the end of the war is needed to identify all suspicious suppliers. Secondly, research projects trying to locate loot in German library holdings today at least need to extend their researched period, since the acquisitions of loot didn't stop at the end of the war. However, this will hardly suffice. Only general revisions of the complete stocks of German libraries will. Although, this is a huge task, it will be the only way to identify the loot among it, facing the wide spread distribution of looted books in Germany during the war and up until today.

³⁷ Sebastian Finsterwalder and Peter Pröls, "Raubgut für den Wiederaufbau: Die Bergungsstelle für wissenschaftliche Bibliotheken in Berlin," in *Bergung von Kulturgut im Nationalsozialismus: Mythen, Hintergründe, Auswirkungen*, ed. Pia Schönberger and Sabine Loitfellner, Schriftenreihe der Kommission für Provenienzforschung 6 (Wien: Böhlau, 2016), 332.